DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 182 787 CS 502 811

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TITLE Communication and Values.
PUB DATE Feb 80
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association (Portland, OR, February 16-20, 1980)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Cultural Awareness; Educational Research; *Ethical Values; Foreign Countries; *Personal Values; *Social Values; *Speech Instruction; Values
IDENTIFIERS Communication Research; *Intercultural Communication

ABSTRACT

Communication experts and researchers have done little to help prepare themselves or others to cope with values in the communication revolution that is taking place. The problem goes beyond the influence the media has in the United States; it has implications of international issues of survival. What is needed is an emphasis on research and teaching of values, not ethics, but values. Ethics are relative to the culture, values underlie ethics and provide a way to make normative judgements. Value analysis is essential to an understanding of what is unstated when people agree or disagree in interpersonal interaction . It is essential to an understanding of how public persuasion takes place. (TJ)

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COMMUNICATION AND VALUES

Malcom O. Sillars

One doesn't need to be much of an expert in media technology, and I am not, to realize that we are a part of a communication revolution. Marshall McLuhan's global electronic village is fast coming upon us with the expansion of satellite communication. The Video Tape Recorder will soon be replaced by the video storage disk permitting us all to purchase information and entertainment the way teenagers purchase rock records today. The cable TV system will continue to expand, thus granting audience access to smaller and smaller interest groups. Video conferencing procedures now being tested by telephone companies may revolutionize the environment of small group interaction.

How well have we prepared for the impact of this technological expansion? As a matter of fact, how well have we adapted to the communication revolution which is already upon us? What is there in the humanistic and social science research arsenal to understand let alone to conquer, control and use such technology for the general welfare? And for those of us who teach young people how to cope with communication, what do we have to give them which will prevent them from becoming slaves to what the technicians provide, and the communication exploiters exploit?

The problem may be far greater than the influence which media has on us here in this country. To the communication revolution vast international issues of survival are linked.

When Charlane and I were in Tehran three years ago, the lobby of the Tehran Hilton Hotel had a crowd of teenaged Iranian girls, not

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a full two generations removed from the Chador, carrying flowers and scrap books in hopes that they might see, touch or talk to the Million Dollar Man who was there on a visit. And in a restaurant featuring the ancient Persian foods, an Iranian friend (a biochemist) excitedly got up from our dinner to get the autograph of Lee Majors — for her children, she said.

The unresponsive regime of the Shah, Savac's brutality, and the materialism of the wealthy probably led to the Islamic revolution in that country but one could not help but see that American television had played its part. In small villages where men herded sheep and used animals to plow and women wore the chador and washed their family's clothes in a stream, television antennas glistened in the warm sun atop the adobe homes. The incongruity of beaming tales of an American superman saving American lives, wealth and values into the lives of a people whose tradition is rooted in a history of conquest by others and a religion of passionate dedication to martyrdom is enormous.

It is a difficult pill for us to swallow, rooted as we are in the traditions of free speech, but perhaps nations like Saudi Arabia and Lybia, were correct in taking modern technology for building hospitals, transportation systems and industries, as the Iranians did, but kept our the messages of the western world as the Iranians did not. The crucial issue in the Middle East today is not Russian troops in Afganistan or hostages at the American Embassy in Tehran. It is, how does a developing nation develop its resources and improve the health and comfort of its people without disrupting its rich value systems?

This problem of slowly changing value systems to which we must adapt if we are to deal with others internationally has its counterpart here at home as well. Issues of abortion, ERA, conservation, family stability, gay rights, the role of the government in our lives are all rooted in our values.

And where have we been as teachers of communication? Well, we haven't put much serious attention to values as they function in communication. Yes, we give them a nod. No one in this room would deny that they are important but here's one small bit of evidence. The SCA Index to Journals in Communication Studies edited by Ron and Irene Matlon, covering articles between 1915 and 1974, lists 128 articles on attitude formation and change, 96 on ethos or credibility, and only 9 on values. That certainly indicates where our research emphasis has been.

What we need now, I would argue, is more attention from our best researchers, humanistic and experimental, to the systematic exploration of the function of values in communication.

And as teachers we need to use what knowledge we have and can gain to help our students cope with the communication problems which face them. Such an emphasis on values has some distinct advantages.

Values serve as generalized socially defined conceptions of what a people believe is good. Their study provides a basis for finding an essential unity among the participants in an interaction, among the senders, receivers, messages and environment of communication. Because our values are reflections of ourselves, and our society, because we shape them and they shape us, they will not be excluded from our literature, our drama, our public addresses, our private talk, and our mass media. Understanding the unity which values provide for the communication process will make it easier to cope with the infinite bits of information which bombard us. If we do not find a basis of unity and permit our concept of communication to be broken into small pieces, the technicians and the communication managers with their Nielsen ratings and their narrow objectives will own us all.

Attention to values will also help us to escape the ethical dilemmas which are inherent in a pluralistic society and which we as teachers are plagued.

Bob Jeffrey, while president of SCA in 1973, lamented the lack of attention to the teaching of the ethics of communication which are represented by their lack of attention in our textbooks. Speaking before the Speech Communication Association of the Eastern States Convention that year, he said:

> Perhaps our present values, with an emphasis on relevancy and pragmatism, reject the need for an ethical base on which to build a communication construct. Perhaps our present values, with an emphasis on relevance and pragmatism, are responsible for the ethical permissiveness that allows the Nixon administration to design a "Big Brother" project and strike at the roots of freedom of the press.

Well, it is always a pleasure to disagree with my good friend and former office mate from Iowa and I will do so now. I don't believe we should teach ethics. Ethics are relative in our society. While we all have personal ethical standards we should be very careful about how we promulgate them in a plural society. This is not Iran or Lybia or Saudi Arabia where one ethical system can be imposed by government or by teachers. Shifts in value hierarchies can only come about through many individual changes and they come about quite slowly. In a plural society the extent to which we force changes no matter how well meaning is a measure of the extent to which we lose a precious base value -- freedom.

Were we as teachers to consciously set about teaching an ethical system in any substantial way we would either impose our own value system or impose the predominant value system of the society. This problem is a dramatic one for me living as a non-Mormon in Utah and it is for the fifty or so percent of my students who are Mormon as they confront me in the classroom. Shall I teach them my ethics or, because they are the majority in the society, shall I teach theirs? Such pluralism is of course not limited to Utah. It exists through the nation. Some of you may have greater problems than I do because you teach students who ascribe to a wider variety of ethical systems than mine do. You all have your own

personal experiences which tell you that to try to teach students an ethical system, no matter how good you consider it to be, has grave dangers. We might note that what's sauce for the faculty member is sauce for the Dean, Principal or State Legislator. No, ethics shouldn't be taught but values must be. The study of ethics advocated by Jeffrey is prescriptive. The study of values behind ethical systems is normative. Students must be taught to analyze their own arguments, those of their heroes and of their enemies to clarify their own values. They must learn to break down surface beliefs of conflict to the essential value issues which warrant them. And they must learn to know what values they are being sold through the media.

Yes, teaching about values in communication will help to solve our ethical dilemma and it will also rid us of the commitment which too many still have to the reason-emotion dichotomy. The unreasonable we see in messages is perfectly reasonable if we understand the values which serve as warrants behind claims. In fact the very dichotomy reason VS emotion is a fundamental value reason is good emotion is bad. That is why men are better at math than women and women are more sensitive to others feelings. That is merely a way of asserting women's inferiority in a technological and rationalistic age. The compensation our values gives to women, of course, is intuition - the ability to arrive at correct conclusions from irrational premises.

To explore this kind of folly further let me quote Max Rafferty, California's gift the the columns of American's national press. He is ideal, of course, in providing good examples of bad thinking. Last month he provided, to use his own vernacular, a lulu. After quoting Kipling, "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," he told us he looks at the world and the Ayatollah Khomeini:

> As an educator, I'm used to applying the hitherto reliable tools of logic and reason in the solving of tough problems. So I started out confidently to apply them to the Iranian version of Dante's Inferno, only to have them break in my hands. ...
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> Take the Ayatollah Khomeini, for example. Here's an old man with a high and respected religious position who -- to the best of my knowledge -- never committed a single act of violence throughout his first 78 years. All of a sudden, he comes back to Iran and starts bellowing about cutting people's hands off and about America being Satan. ...
>
> Now, no matter how you look at this nightmare -- religiously, politically or militarily -- it just plain makes no sense. What good, for instance, can it possibly do to cut anyone's hands off? If you want to punish him, put him in jail and make him work, turning out something useful for the society which he has allegedly offended. But he can't do any work if you've rendered him permanently unhandy.

It is clear that as Max says, he doesn't understand the reasoning of Khomeini, but, he sure does know how to generate hyperbole. Unfortunately, he doesn't know much about metaphor, or values. The ancient punishment for stealing in Islam is, of course, to cut off the hands and Satan is the embodiment of evil. From his perspective and value system, Khomeini communicated well to his own Sheite Moslem followers. America by supporting the Shah and taking the oil was a devil and a thief. And it's clear that Khomeini knows far more about our system than Max Rafferty knows of his. No one who has watched the TV news these last few months can avoid giving reluctant admiration to the Ayatollah and his followers for the way they used the American media and then kicked out the newsmen when they no longer served his purpose.

I admit that Max is an easy target. But the principle is still there for all of us. We damage our ability to understand what is being communicated when we assume that our values are reasoned and those of others are emotional.

There are a lot of things we don't know about values. That's why we need a systematic attempt to see how they work in communication transactions. That process is only beginning. Those beginnings, interestingly enough, have strong roots in our Western Speech Communication Association. From the early writings of Ed Steele, then Steele and Charles Redding to the work of Mary McEdwards, Tom Frentz, Janice Rushing and Walt Fisher, we westerners have shown more interest in values than the rest of our professional colleagues.

It seems appropriate for us to pick up the beginnings of this western tradition. To expand it beyond the critical, historical and theoretical beginnings we have given it in a more sophisticated humanistic examination would be one step. To pick up the tradition of Milton Rokeach and examine it experimentally would be another.

Value analysis is essential to an understanding of what is unstated when people agree or disagree in interpersonal interaction. It is essential to an understanding of how public persuasion takes place. It is essential to an understanding of the aesthetic information in literature or theatre. And, I believe, it will provide the most fruitful base for a reunion of humanistic and behavioral research. I would urge on all of us greater awareness and concern for value as a unifying concept for communication. The systematic scientific, humanistic and aesthetic examination of values is the only base I see for a communication theory which can confront the technological communication explosion with which scholars and teachers must deal in the next decade.